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ABSTRACT

Possible reasons for the nationwide increase in the number of children identified as learning disabled (LD) include abrogation of general education's responsibility toward difficult to educate children, increasing differences in preservice general and special education training, the increase in parent/student rights litigation, and parental preference for "special" education. Concern with this increasing number of children identified as learning disabled and lack of success with the traditional pull-out resource program led the school district of Independence, Missouri, to develop the Focus Curriculum Program for third graders (LD and non-handicapped) scoring below the 30th percentile in reading. The Curriculum provides an all-day program focused on reading instruction and follows principles demonstrated by the effective schools research including increasing student time-on-task, improving the quality of teacher-pupil interactions, and lowering the teacher-student ratio. Students spend between one and three academic quarters in the program. Preliminary results with 56 LD students indicate the intervention had a significant effect on reading scores and that this improvement was sustained a year later in the regular fourth grade. Problems have included difficulties with reintegration into the regular class and reluctance by LD resource teachers to believe that so much growth is possible in such a short time. Expansion of the program might provide students with needed remedial help before they are identified as learning disabled. (DB)

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AN ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION APPROACH

WITH

LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of service to learning disabled students in the public school has received much attention in the past several years. Both state and federal education officials are concerned with the ever rising number of handicapped students identified as learning disabled. While the total school population has been declining, the number of learning disabled children has been increasing. In fact, since 1976 the number of students classified as LD has increased by 119% while the school population has decreased 9.4%, (Latham, 1984).

James Chalfant (1984) has clearly set forth the difficulties local and state educational agencies have with identifying learning disabled students. One obvious explanation to the increase in the number of identified learning disabled students is that the local educational agencies have become more knowledgeable and sophisticated in the identification process. While this is certainly true, it accounts for only a portion of an explanation. It is suggested that the continual increase of children identified as learning disabled is due to a number of more subtle reasons.

The mood of the educational community fifteen years ago was one of antagonism with parents who were looking for help with their handicapped children. While some mentally retarded children, deaf children, blind children, and speech impaired children were served in the public schools; many learning disabled children, emotionally disturbed children, and severely handicapped children were virtually

excluded from a free appropriate public education.

When the Education Of All Handicapped Children's Act (PL 94-142) was enacted schools were required to serve all handicapped children and while many special educators did not yet fully understand the new law and it's regulations, they worked hard to meet the mandates of the new laws. Special educators moved handicapped children from general education and began to provide more appropriate programs.

General education gladly accepted assistance with these difficult to educate children. The more special educator and parents "sold" the importance of special education, the more general education allowed their responsibility to these children to wane. In the early days of PL 94-142, the notion of providing education in the least restrictive environment was ignored. Rather than looking at least restrictive environment, educators looked at "mainstreaming" learning disabled students. This meant placing the student in anything in the regular classroom setting with little regard for the student's or regular classroom teacher's needs. This practice in not placing a student in the least restricitve environment.

In addition to the insidious abrogation of general education's responsibility to the difficult to educate children, pre-service training programs embarked on a greater separation of special and general education programs in our universities and colleges. Because special education was now required by law to serve all handicapped children, and as special educators were over selling their services, general educations answer to helping teachers deal with children with

differences was to refer the child to special education. As time went by, the gap between pre-service special education and general education training programs grew wider.

As this was taking place, there was a simultaneous and significant change in the demographics of our nation. Increases in the number of single parent families and two parent families where both parents worked led to an increase need for day care and early childhood programs. Many children entering kindergarten today have had a preschool/day care experience. Having children enter school earlier has led to a greater awareness of differences and delays within children. These differences, observed by preschool teachers or day care workers, altered teacher expectation and, ultimately, student performance.

Another not so subtle difference over the past ten years has been the wave of parent/student rights litigation. The courts have set a tone in education that has frightened both special education and general education. The majority of cases have been directed toward providing special services, reinforcing the notion that special education is better. Ross (1976) stated that placement in LD is often the easiest alternative for a school. This placement suggests that the student's problem is at least temporarily alleviated and indicates that the school is doing something to for the student.

The concept of least restrictive education has not been emphasized by parents, school officials, or the courts. In fact, attempts at services in the least restrictive environment with

classroom and/or curricular adaptation has not been met with approval by advocates, parents, or the courts. Parents seem to prefer "special" education for their child rather than classroom and/or curricular adaptation.

Whatever the reasons, the incidence of learning disability has continued to climb despite the reduction in the general school population and the efforts of the Federal and State Departments of Education to impose stricter criteria. The end result however is that the local educational agencies must educate these identified LD students. The most common treatment intervention is to provide a resource or itinerate service. There appears to be a significant inability to rehabilitate these youngsters. It would appear that we are teaching L.D. youngsters to be dependant and that the traditional pull-out or resource framework of intervention for these students has only limited effectiveness. We must spend more time investigating procedures such as increasing student time on task, teacher time management, student engagement time, and alternative intervention strategies including leaving the L.D. student in the regular classroom.

BACKGROUND

The School District of Independence, Missouri, is a suburban school district serving approximately eleven thousand students kindergarten through twelfth grade. Our December 1984, child count indicated that 5.6% of our school population was identified as learning disabled. We currently employ thirty-seven teachers of the

learning disabled and have an average caseload of eighteen students per teacher. As with many local educational agencies, our primary intervention model is the pull-out resource model where the students are pulled out of the regular classroom seen by the special education teacher for sometime each day. Approximately eight percent of the learning disabled students are served in a self-contained classroom.

After several years of closely monitoring the improvement of reading performance among the learning disabled students, we have found that very few students show significant improvement. We are able to teach some compensatory skill development, study skills, and some improvement in reading achievement but for the most part we are teaching dependency on the smaller educational setting, continual assistance in instruction, and separation from the regular classroom environment. We are responding to LD students as handicapped as they are performing in accordance to our expectations.

When teachers were asked to identify what it would take to demonstrate greater improvement in reading performance of the students identified as learning disabled, they reported that smaller caseload sizes and more time with the students should give us the desired effect. In addition to what the teachers reported would increase reading performance, effective schools research has shown that increasing student time-on-task, increasing student engagement time, improving the quality of teacher-pupil interaction, reducing classroom distractions, and improving the quality of teaching skill makes a difference in increasing student outcome.

FOCUS CURRICULUM PROGRAM

The Focus Curriculum Program is an alternative educational intervention program for third grade students who score at, or below, the 30th percentile on a standardized reading achievement test. The program provides these students with a concentrated focus on the mastery of critical reading skills and time to practice these skills.

Students (regular education students or special education students) who meet the criteria and whose parents approve are placed in the program. These students are provided a six hour school day focused primarily on reading instruction. They are also provided some (one hour) instruction in math and recreational physical education. The teacher pupil ratio is 1:10 and each student remains in the program of one quarter of the school year.

Those students who have been identified as learning disabled are not so identified to the focus teachers and the individual educational program is developed without the input of the focus teachers. This may be somewhat confusing. The I.E.P. was developed with the multidisciplinary team, including the parents, and it reflected the goals and objectives of the program. This was done to eliminate the possibility of negative teacher expectations of a "handicapped" student.

The direct instruction focused on specific learning objective. These objectives were reinforced with supervised guided practice. The teaching staff were provided inservice education on how to increase

student time-on-task, improve the quality of teacher-pupil interaction, reduce classroom distracters, alter teacher expectations of these students, and improve the quality of teaching skill. The Focus Curriculum Program has been in operation for two years.

SUBJECTS

We have served a total of one hundred and ten students of whom fifty-six have been identified as learning disabled prior to their entry into the program. As mentioned previously, the teachers in the Focus Curriculum Program did not know which children had been identified as learning disabled. Each LD student who was placed in the Focus Curriculum Program had an IEP and parental permission for placement.

Fourteen students were girls and thirty-two were boys. All but one of our thirteen elementary schools had LD students participating in the program. All test scores are normal curve equivalents. The reading scores prior to entry into the program ranged from 6.7 NCE to 44.10 NCE, with an average NCE of 21.80 for the entire group of LD students. The School District average NCE in reading is 60.00 demonstrating that the Focus students were considerably below the district average. All testing was conducted in the Spring of the school year.

Fifty of the fifty-six LD students in the program had test scores from both second and third grade providing a basis for pre and post intervention testing. Twenty-five of the fifty-six students continued

to the fourth grade allowing for a further look at the sustaining effect of the intervention.

RESULTS

The Wilcoxon matched pairs signed-ranks non-parametric statistical test was used to analyze pre- and post-intervention data. The null hypothesis was that the Focus Curriculum Program intervention did not make a significant difference in the reading scores of identified learning disabled students. For the purposes of this study our probability for rejecting the null was set at the .01 level.

For those students who had scores from both second and third grade, that is to say pre- and post-intervention, a Z score of 4.61 was obtained allowing rejection of the null hypothesis thus indicating that the intervention had made a significant difference in the reading scores of identified learning disabled students in the Focus Curriculum Program.

Once it was determined that the intervention did make a significant difference in the reading score, the effect of the ability of the students to sustain these gains in reading was investigated. There were twenty-five students who had fourth grade scores. These were students who had participated in the Focus Curriculum Program as third grade students during the 1983-84 school year. The null hypothesis was that there was no sustained gains in reading scores of LD students placed in the Focus Curriculum Program one year after their leaving the program. A probability level of .01 was set. A t

score of 62.50 was obtained allowing rejection of the null hypothesis.

Growth in NCE scores from second to third grade ranged from 0 to 34.3, with a median growth of 14.0, and from third to fourth grade from 1.20 to 35.70, with a median growth of 8.1. The average growth of NCE scores from second to third grade was 10.0 and from third to fourth grade was 2.83. The average gains of these students can be compared with the average gains made by all the students in the school district which were 2.0 from second to third grade and .30 from third to fourth grade.

In an attempt to investigate both parent and teacher attitudes regarding student improvement, a survey was sent to a random sample of thirty parents of the LD children in the Focus Curriculum Program and to a random sample of thirty teachers who received the students once the program was completed. Eight parent surveys and seven teacher surveys were returned. All of the parents responded that they felt their child benefited from the program and that they were, in fact, better readers as a result of the program. The teachers who responded to the survey indicated that they rated the program slightly above average in its overall ability to assist students. They indicated that the program improved children's self-concept, provided smaller class size thus allowing for more individualized attention, and helped children improve their attitudes about school.

DISCUSSION

We have had limited success with the traditional pull-out

programs for our learning disabled students and the data from the Focus Curriculum Program is an exciting first step in our look at alternative strategies for serving the learning disabled student. The Focus Curriculum Program has allowed us the opportunity to more than double the amount of time a student has intervention from approximately 4.38 weeks in a traditional pull-out program (45 minutes a day) to nine weeks of intervention. In addition, we have been able to reduce the pupil:teacher ratio from approximately 18:1 to 10:1.

It is important to note that we believe the effects of the program were not related to just an increase in time and a lowering of the pupil:teacher ratio. We have had programs in the past that have accounted for these variables and have not demonstrated significant growth. Much time was spent in teacher training developing teacher skills in increasing the students' time on task, students' engagement time, students' time in guided practice, teachers' expectations of the students, reduction of classroom distractions, and teacher management time. These are critical issues that need to be improved in all teaching situations.

While the Focus Curriculum Program does segregate third grade students who have lower reading scores. Not all of the students in the Focus Curriculum Program are handicapped. The students who have been identified as learning disabled are integrated with non-handicapped low readers. The student, with parent permission, is placed in the program for the entire school school day for one quarter (some students were placed for a maximum of three quarters one). Because the program is so intensive, has non-handicapped peers, and because the

student remains in the program for such a short period of time, we believe that the program is the least restrictive for these students.

The benefit of this program is that the student is not stigmatized as being handicapped and can continue with his/her peers. Remember, the Focus teachers do not know which students are handicapped.

There are some difficulties we have encountered. The program is by no means perfect. The major difficulties encountered in the program have been the transition of the students to and from the Focus Curriculum Program, the regular classroom teachers' hesitancy to allow a student to be removed from the class and integrating the student back into the classroom when the program ends. The students does not receive a regular third grade curriculum while in the Focus Curriculum Program and does have some re-integration needs when returned to the regular classroom.

To reduce the problems associated with the re-integration of a student the Focus Curriculum Program staff meets with the regular classroom teacher and building principal to plan the re-entry into the regular classroom. Even with this effort, we have met some resistance.

Another difficulty encountered has been the reluctance of the resource learning disabilities teacher to believe that an LD student can demonstrate such growth in such a short period of time. Even the objective data had not convince some of the resource LD teachers that these gains had been made.

There are several options to the program that might help alleviate these two major difficulties. First, better inservice of both the regular and special education staff prior to beginning a program like the Focus Curriculum. Such inservice might reduce the fears teachers have about not doing an adequate job of instruction or about perhaps not being needed due to alternative intervention strategies. Secondly, it is suggested that inservice concentrate more heavily a discussion of the curriculum used in the program and why reading is so heavily emphasized.

A solution to the problems mentioned above is to develop the Focus Curriculum Program within a building for the students in that building. This would increase teacher knowledge of the program, increase communication among teachers, and decrease anxiety about being a needed part of the student's education. It is our plan to replicate the program in an elementary school during the 1985-86 school year to determine if these difficulties will be resolved.

CONCLUSION

The incidence of learning disabilities has continued to grow over the past ten years despite the efforts of Federal, State, and Local educational agencies. These students must be provided an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

The School District of Independence has developed an alternative treatment program called the Focus Curriculum Program that provides

intensive, short-term reading and math instruction to those third grade students who score below the 30th percentile on a standardized reading test.

The students in the program have demonstrated significant growth in reading ability as a result of the intervention of the Focus Curriculum Program. The data also suggests that the increase in reading is sustained during the fourth grade.

While the data is encouraging more needs to be done. It is suggested that the program be expanded to serve all second and third grade students who score below the 30th percentile. This would hopefully serve students before they are identified as learning disabled, handicapped.

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